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ABSTRACT

This digest presents eight principles drawn from theory and research on second language acquisition and culturally sensitive instruction to guide teachers who work with linguistically and culturally diverse students. Each principle is accompanied by a brief explanation and suggestions for classroom techniques and activities. They are: (1) bilingualism is an asset and should be fostered; (2) there is an ebb and flow to children's bilingualism, and it is rare for both languages to be perfectly balanced; (3) there are culturally different patterns in language use; (4) for some bilingual children, code-switching is a normal language phenomenon; (5) children come to learn languages in many different ways; (6) language is used to communicate meaning; (7) language flourishes best in a language-rich environment; and (8) children should be encouraged to experiment with language. A brief bibliography is provided. (MSE)

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ERIC Digest

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National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning

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ERIC® CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS
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Digest

October 1995

(EDO-FL-96-02)

Fostering Second Language Development in Young Children

National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning

This Digest is based on a report published by the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, *Fostering Second Language Development in Young Children: Principles and Practices* (1995), by Barry McLaughlin. Copies of the report are available for $4.00 from NCRCDSLL, 1118 22nd Street NW, Washington, DC 20037.

As the number of linguistically and culturally diverse students entering American schools increases, more and more teachers are faced with the challenge of educating children with limited English skills. Many of these teachers, however, have had little or no training in second language development and need guidelines to help them understand the process young children undergo as they learn a second language. Teachers also need to be aware of how to help their students maintain their home language.

This Digest outlines eight principles, drawn from theory and research on second language acquisition and culturally sensitive instruction, to guide educators working with linguistically diverse students and to help them recognize that bilingualism is a process that occurs in stages.

Principle #1: *Bilingualism is an asset and should be fostered.*

Research increasingly shows the cognitive, cultural, and economic advantages of bilingualism (Hakuta & Pease-Alvarez, 1992). Children who have the opportunity to speak two languages should be encouraged to maintain both, so they can enjoy the benefits that may accompany bilingual status.

Children from homes where English is not the native language should be encouraged to cultivate their home language as well as English. In some cases, the parents of these children are unable to speak English. If the children do not maintain their home language, they risk losing the ability to communicate well with their family members (Wong Fillmore, 1991). Additional support for the home language can come from after school and Saturday classes.

Principle #2: *There is an ebb and flow to children's bilingualism; it is rare for both languages to be perfectly balanced.*

The false argument is sometimes made that encouraging the native language at home prevents children from developing either language well. It is important to realize, rather, that as a child is learning a second language, one language may predominate because the child is using that language more than the other at a given time. Children showing a lack of proficiency in both languages are most likely undergoing a developmental phase in which limited use causes proficiency in the home language to decline, while the second language has not yet reached an age-appropriate level. Teachers should view this as a period of temporary *language imbalance* during which the child may not perform as well as native speakers in either language. This should be considered healthy and normal. It is rare for bilinguals to have both languages in balance. Yet, most bilingual children will reach age-level proficiency in their dominant language given adequate exposure and opportunities for use.

Principle #3: *There are different cultural patterns in language use.*

Language minority children from different cultural backgrounds may experience culture conflict in school because their ways of learning and communicating are different from the routines of the classroom. Teachers can identify these differences through classroom communication patterns. For example, some children may not participate verbally in classroom activities because in their home culture calling attention to oneself and showing one's knowledge are regarded as overly assertive and even arrogant forms of behavior (Philips, 1972). Likewise, some children might be embarrassed by a teacher saying, "You should be proud of yourself"; more effective praise for them might be, "Your family will be proud of you."

By validating the students' cultures and using communication patterns familiar to them, teachers provide a much richer and more effective approach to culturally sensitive instruction than by focusing on occasional celebrations of the history and traditions of different ethnic groups. Children will feel validated in the classroom if they are encouraged to acclimate gradually through daily affirmation of their learning styles and communication patterns.

Principle #4: *For some bilingual children, code-switching is a normal language phenomenon.*

While some children acquiring a second language appear at first to confuse the two languages, code-switching is, in fact, a normal aspect of second language acquisition. Young bilingual children tend to insert single items from one language into the other (McClure, 1977), primarily to resolve ambiguities and clarify statements. Children over nine and adults, however, tend to switch languages at the phrase or sentence level, typically to convey social meanings.

Studies of code-switching in adults show it to be a sophisticated, rule-governed communicative device used to achieve goals such as conveying emphasis or establishing cultural identity. Children acquiring a second language are learning to switch languages in the sophisticated manner they hear in their homes and communities. Teachers should not hesitate to switch languages to accommodate the language and culture of their students. The goal must always be to communicate, rather than adhere to rigid rules about which language can be used in a given circumstance or at a given time.

Principle #5: *Children come to learn second languages in many different ways.*

Children become bilingual in different ways, the two most common being *simultaneous* acquisition of two languages and *successive* acquisition of a second language. A child under the age of three who is exposed to two languages usually experiences

simultaneous acquisition. If the child is exposed to the second language at an older age, successive acquisition usually occurs. The rate of acquisition varies depending on the amount of exposure and support the child receives as well as on individual differences. Four types of bilingualism that fall into the two ways of learning languages have been identified.

For types 1 and 2, children have had high exposure to both languages at an early age.

- **Type 1**, *Simultaneous Bilingualism*, refers to children who have early exposure to both languages and are given ample opportunities to use both.
- **Type 2**, *Receptive Bilingualism*, refers to children who have high exposure to a second language but have little opportunity to use or practice it.

For types 3 and 4, children are learning the second language sequentially, after they have learned their first language.

- **Type 3**, *Rapid Successive Bilingualism*, refers to children who have had little exposure to a second language before entering school but have ample opportunity to use it once they enter.
- **Type 4**, *Slow Successive Bilingualism*, refers to children who have had little exposure to a second language and who have or avail themselves of few opportunities and have low motivation to use it.

While these four generally describe the second language acquisition process, the complexity of bilingualism can produce other variances.

Principle #6: *Language is used to communicate meaning.*

Children will internalize a second language more readily if they are asked to engage in meaningful activities that require using the language. For children who are learning English as a second language, it is important that the teacher gauge which aspects of the language the child has acquired and which ones are still to be mastered. Wong Fillmore (1985) recommends a number of steps that teachers can use to engage their students:

- Use demonstrations, modeling, role-playing.
- Present new information in the context of known information.
- Paraphrase often.
- Use simple structures, avoid complex structures.
- Repeat the same sentence patterns and routines.
- Tailor questions for different levels of language competence and participation.

Principle #7: *Language flourishes best in a language-rich environment.*

Teachers of children with limited English proficiency need to be good models of language use. In particular, they should encourage children to practice English as much as possible and provide reinforcement by expanding on the children's vocabulary repertoire and by speaking coherently. It is important for children learning English to interact with others in the classroom as much as possible. Speaking with their peers will give them a stronger reason for communicating.

Second language learners also need to be exposed to meaningful literacy activities. This is especially important for children from homes where literacy activities may be rare. It is vital for teachers to make reading and writing appealing and significant to the children. They should encourage students to write about people, places, or activities that are important to them. Such topics will motivate students to take risks with the language that they might not take with artificial or meaningless subjects.

Principle #8: *Children should be encouraged to experiment with language.*

Learning a second language is similar to learning a first language in that a child needs to experiment and produce utterances that may be inaccurate yet reflect normal language development. In this way, the child is attempting to figure out the patterns and rules that govern the language. To correct the child's speech, teachers should rephrase or expand on what the child has already said. Feedback from peers will also help the children determine which phrases are right and wrong. While children may appear to be making more mistakes during experimentation, they are actually learning to internalize chunks of appropriate speech. They test these chunks of language by using them in situations that may or may not be appropriate. The feedback they receive helps them determine whether they have guessed correctly.

Conclusion

If current demographic trends continue, more teachers will face culturally and linguistically diverse students in their classrooms. These teachers need to understand the process of second language acquisition and how to alter their instructional styles to meet their students' needs. Adjustments in instruction, however, should not include a lowering of standards for these children. Instead, teachers should be encouraged to keep their standards high and to develop methods that will promote the achievement of all their students as they become competent, literate adults.

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